



## Let Me Down Gently by hauntedlullabies

**Category:** Stranger Things, 2016

**Genre:** Hurt-Comfort, Romance

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Billy H., Jonathan B., Nancy W., Steve H.

**Pairings:** Billy H./Steve H., Jonathan B./Nancy W.

**Status:** In-Progress

**Published:** 2017-12-27 10:57:08

**Updated:** 2017-12-27 10:57:08

**Packaged:** 2019-12-17 03:21:41

**Rating:** T

**Chapters:** 1

**Words:** 2,226

**Publisher:** [www.fanfiction.net](http://www.fanfiction.net)

**Summary:** Steve never thought he'd miss being the center of Billy's attention. Billy never thought he was deserving of love. With the events of the past month becoming memories, Steve was learning to deal with his own growth. He noticed the change in Billy, too, and found himself wanting to step in and be the one he leaned on. But something was holding him back from fully letting Steve in

## Let Me Down Gently

Mrs. Henderson had seemed a bit disheveled when she asked Steve to pick Dustin up from school. He stood in their living room that morning, being offered coffee and politely declining. The Henderson household was small, but it was cozy and had this warm, welcoming glow. Steve liked this house. It was a tight fit, but Steve just wasn't used to this kind of living space.

Claudia instinctively attempted to fix her hair every 30 seconds as she talked with Steve. Not that he wasn't understanding; she was a single mother with a child who had just gone through something major, after all. While she wasn't Joyce-Byers-level paranoid, she had a right to be a little more worried about Dustin than usual. The kids, aside from Will, were all experts on keeping their parents in the dark about the incident earlier in the month. With everything starting to settle down, Claudia was allowed to have some breathing room to get everything back on track, including the flyaways from her hairdo. Steve was happy to be any help to her that he could.

"...and please make sure you're already waiting for him when school lets out. It's very cold, and even though I insist on him wearing his heavy winter coat..."

She had been going on for a while. Dustin was hurriedly moving around the other side of the house, presumably tying his shoes and brushing his teeth and doing whatever else kids do to get ready for school. Steve was starting to wish he had accepted that coffee.

"...and it just truly means so much that you're doing this for my Dusty. I like knowing that someone I trust is picking him up. So, thank you again, Steven." Steve smiled at her.

"Of course, Mrs. Henderson. I'm more than happy to do it." She looked like she was about to hug him, when Dustin bounded into the room. He let out a huge sigh, hunching over like he just ran a marathon.

"Hey mom, hey Steve. I'm ready," he said, barely breathing between words. With that, the two headed out. Dustin, of course, had to be

pulled into a tight hug from his mother and beg her to stop smothering him before they left. Steve only found it a little bit funny.

Steve could tell Dustin was thinking about something that he was intentionally keeping to himself. As they climbed into the car, Steve turned the heat all the way up.

"Seatbelt, shithead," he said, gesturing to it.

"Okay, okay, it's on."

"So you wanna tell me what's got you so worked up this morning?" Steve pulled out of Dustin's neighborhood and drove onto the main road.

"I was looking *forever* to find this tooth from one of the demodogs," he began, pulling it out of his jacket pocket to show Steve. "I dunno if it's from Dart, but I had to find it to show Max. She's gonna think it's awesome." He held the small tooth in the palm of his hand, inspecting it for a minute before putting it back in his pocket.

"You were running around trying to find that thing so you could show it to Max?" Steve asked, skeptical.

"Yeah."

"You still have a thing for her?"

Dustin went silent at this, which Steve took as a 'yes.'

"I don't know... it's just that she's an official member of our party now, and-"

"Alright look, I'm gonna have to stop you right there," Steve interrupted, taking his eyes off the road to look at Dustin for a second. He held up a finger as he talked.

"First of all, why you would even want to keep that thing is beyond an explanation." He almost shudders at the mental image of the demodogs. "You should get rid of it."

"And second, you can't... you can't just try and steal somebody's

girlfriend. Even if," he starts, looking at him again, "...even if that person is your friend. You just don't *do* that, okay?"

Dustin looks down at his feet. "I wasn't even trying to steal Max..."

"Come on, kid. I've been there, done that way too many times not to recognize it."

"Oh, and you're an expert on relationships?" he asked, giving him a look. Steve rolled his eyes, unable to wipe the grin off of his face.

"Yeah, whatever, dickhead. Just promise me you're not gonna ruin your friendship with Lucas over this?" he asked. Dustin nodded confidently.

"Promise."

Steve pulled up to the main entrance of Hawkins Middle School, where Mike, Lucas and Will were all already standing. Steve sent him off with a "Don't be late" and Dustin returned it with a wave as soon as he was with his friends. Steve drove away with a good feeling in his chest. Starting off the morning with a life lesson proved to be good for the conscience.

The warm feeling stayed with him as he entered his own school. He caught up with Nancy and Jonathan at Nancy's locker. He touched her lightly on the back to let her know he was there.

"Hey, Nance," he said, being pulled into a hug. He was greeted by her counterpart the same way.

"You seem happy this morning," Jonathan commented as he shoved his hands back in his pockets. Steve shrugged.

"Yeah, you could say so. I've been alright," he replied. Nancy smiled up at him.

"That's really good, Steve. I'm happy to hear that."

They all looked at each other, as words were unnecessary to convey what the three of them were collectively thinking. Steve wasn't jealous of Nancy and Jonathan. In fact, he was happy for them. And

he was happy that it was Jonathan of all people who Nancy was with, because there were a lot of scummy guys at this school. Steve knew that from personal experience. So, he was grateful that she was being treated right, and that the two were able to take comfort in each other. Steve was slowly dealing with it on his own- and, arguably, Dustin at times- but he found out that he was fine with that. Cliche as it may be, time to work on himself was needed.

"How about Will, man? How's he been?" Steve asked, clapping a hand on Jonathan's arm. He smiled at the thought of his little brother, but it was accompanied by nerves.

"Getting better every day. We think he'll be able to start going to school again next week." Nancy slipped her hand in his.

"He still has nightmares, of course, but, uh, during the day he functions well. If therapy keeps up, he'll be back in no time."

Jonathan had said that like Will was still trapped, or he wasn't fully convinced that he had been freed. His doubt was obvious, but neither Nancy nor Steve would dare voice it. Jonathan needed their complete faith in Will's wellbeing in order for it to reflect in himself.

"Will is seriously like, the toughest kid I know," Steve said, reassuring him with a smile. "He's a fighter."

Nancy squeezed his hand. "Plus, he's got the best big brother ever." Jonathan's face flushed at their reassuring words. He pulled them both into a group hug as if to thank them. They had really mastered the whole non-verbal communication thing.

The bell rung moments later, breaking off their embrace. The school day was starting, and they had to all go be responsible students. Jonathan and Nancy waved him goodbye before walking down the hall hand in hand. Steve smiled at them, raising his hand in response. He stood in place for a minute, then went his own way.

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Steve was the last one out of his final class of the day. He took his time packing up his supplies, and lazily went over to his locker to exchange books and binders and whatever else he would need for the

homework he wasn't even going to do. Ending his school day at his own pace was relaxing, as he didn't have to worry about catching a bus or going to work directly after. Jonathan was working two jobs these days, and Steve almost felt guilty for doing nothing when he got home from school. Almost.

He put his calculus textbook on the top shelf, then grabbed his physics one to take its place in his backpack. All of his classes went by fairly quickly, and lunch was always a pleasure with today being no different. Nancy had complained nonstop about receiving an A on a project when she thought she rightfully deserved an A+. Jonathan's arm had been permanently draped around her waist for comfort, but Steve just tried not to laugh. It was like it was impossible for Nancy to even get angry- she was just too cute. The way she would press her lips together and scrunch up her nose would never come off as intimidating. She was like a little princess. Unless, of course, she had a gun in her hands, but that was an entirely different story.

Steve pulled into the Hawkins Middle School parking lot in a matter of ten minutes of departing from his own school. Mrs. Henderson had informed him that Dustin and the rest of the kids usually stayed after school for AV Club. There weren't any set days for the club to meet, so they just stayed after whenever they felt like it or their teacher said so, which was possible since they were actually the only members of that club. Their close-knit group of nerds probably scared off other kids. But they didn't seem to mind that at all. Steve parked in a spot but hesitated before getting out.

Billy Hargrove was leaning against his Camaro, cigarette between his lips. He was just standing there, one hand in the pocket of his jeans as he smoked in silence, zoning in and out of his own thoughts. His car wasn't on and playing music from the radio as Steve would've expected. It was probably to save gas. But he looked non-threatening enough, so Steve killed the engine in his own car and stepped out. That was when the blond noticed him, giving him a once over before jerking his chin up in acknowledgement. Steve just nodded at him in return.

He almost assumed Billy was going to make some smart ass comment or instigate an argument or something of the like. But that little

gesture was the last of it. Not being in the center of Billy's spotlight turned into this unfamiliar feeling. It was like Billy just... stopped. He stopped trying to get to him. He had gotten what he wanted: Steve's title as king of the school. So maybe he didn't bother simply because he didn't have to. It was different. Steve, at one point, was used to constantly being in Billy's line of sight.

There was this whole "before and after" sequence in Steve's head. Before Billy's subdued demeanor, the thing with the kids and the barely making it out alive shit happened. Billy was constantly coming after Steve and instigating everything, just to get on top. After all of that, Steve had become a bit out of it himself. Billy barely bothered with him anymore, and Steve was okay with that. The liberation of Will Byers was the turning point into Steve's "after." But what was Billy's "after"?

He decided to break the silence.

"Waiting for Max?" Billy almost looked surprised as he took a drag.

"She has her dumb ass club today."

Billy, Steve noted, was not going to do much more talking today. He would be lying if he said he didn't kinda miss Billy's energy. Basketball practice was- dare he say- awkward. When Billy wasn't avoiding him on the court and in passing, the two of them would engage in small talk that felt forced. Steve wanted to ask what had happened to all of his spirit and vitality, but he didn't.

Max waved to the rest of the guys before picking up the pace to meet her brother at his car. He had already gotten in the driver's seat when she climbed in the other side. Dustin's arrival jerked him out of his thoughts.

"Hey, kid. How was your club?" he asked, tousling his brown curls. Dustin smiled brightly up at him.

"It was great! Oh, and by the way, you think you could give Will a ride home too? Mike and Lucas are biking home, and Jonathan has work today." Steve looked up to see Will talking to the aforementioned boys. He looked over.



"Tell him to get his ass over here, then," Steve said, smirking. Dustin practically ran back to where the others were standing. Steve started up his Beamer and waited for them to come back. If he had to do this every day, he wouldn't mind. Even if he had to see Billy Hargrove's cardboard cutout waiting there too.